

## [Chief Joe-Bull's Joke]

Tales - Anecdotes [?????] [3?]

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER EARL BOWMAN

ADDRESS 86 W. 12th. Street, NYC

DATE October 20th. and 31st., 1938

SUBJECT MEDICINE SHOW TALES: "Chief Joe-Bull's Joke" and "The Dancing Turkeys"

1. Date and time of interview

October 18th. and 27th. 1938

2. Place of interview

My quarters, 86 W. 12th. St. NYC

3. Name and address of informant William D. Naylor (address not given me.) As I reported in previous interview—Sept. 19: "Medicine Show" story, —my impression is that he lives in some of the municipal lodging houses. He would not allow me to visit him, claiming his room was not the sort in which to have guests.

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4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in/ touch with informant.

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER EARL BOWMAN

ADDRESS 86 W. 12th. Street, NYC

DATE Oct. 20th and 31st. 1938

SUBJECT MEDICINE SHOW TALES: "Chief Joe-Bull's Joke" and "The Dancing Turkeys"

1. Ancestry American—probably Irish descent.

2. Place and date of birth New York City—72 years old.

3. Family Apparently has none.

4. Places lived in, with dates This I could not learn.

5. Education, with dates Seems to be principally in "School of Hard /Knocks"

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates Carnival, medicine show, and /"pitch-man".

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7. Special skills and interests None that I know.

8. Community and religious activities Unknown to me.

9. Description of informant Mr. Naylor is a well-preserved man of 72 years of age—about five-feet-seven in height, 145 pounds, I should judge. Quite gray but not bald. Smooth-shaven. Has a pleasant thought a bit cynical facial expression. Rather serious, but an evident sense of humor, and somewhat repressed frown. In personal appearance, as to dress, he is neat—although it is obvious his suit has done service for a long time. In conversation he sometimes shows a definite tendency to break away from the subject and become rather excited over some political or social thought that comes to his mind. While he enjoys a bottle or two of beer, do not think he is a serious drinker. [Smokes?]

10. Other Points gained in interview

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER EARL BOWMAN

ADDRESS 86 W. 12th. Street, NYC

DATE Oct. 20th. and 31st. 1938

SUBJECT MEDICINE SHOW TALES: "Chief Joe-Bull's Joke" and "The Dancing Turkeys"

CHIEF JOE-BULL's JOKE

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Doc Porter used to say: "It ain't what anybody knows for certain, but what they think they know for certain that counts, and if people buy [Kickapoo?] Indian Medicine and think it'll cure 'em, it's darn near sure to cure them. And so they haven't been cheated[!?!]"

Which shows that Doc was sincere in believing that the stuff he mixed up out of wild cherry bark (boiled); senna leaves; slippery elm bark; sassafras roots and other "Indian herbs" and all of which he fortified with about sixty-per-cent of good raw corn whiskey, were genuinely beneficial medicines and that he was a human benefactor.

So when people paid fifty cents for a four ounce bottle of "Wild Cherry Elixer"; a dollar for an eight ounce bottle of "Spring Rejuvenator" (which was practically a sassafras high-ball); or twenty-five cents for a couple dozen "Liver Regulator Pills". Doc honestly thought they were getting their money's worth.

Anyhow, Doc took his own medicinal concoctions—especially the "Spring Rejuvenator", and it wasn't a bad drink at that. I've [tasted?] 2 a lot of cocktails that cost a quarter a piece that weren't half as good, and didn't have any more kick to them. But maybe the whiskey we got in those days was better than it is now!

In fact we all, whenever we'd get to feeling under the weather, have a little cold or a touch of malaria—and there was plenty of malaria, chills and fever in the backwoods districts we'd show at, Doc would give us a bottle of medicine or a box of pills, and believe me those pills were-potent....

And speaking of Doc Porter's pills reminds me of a joke, same might call it a dirty trick; but at the time it seemed like a mighty funny joke to me, in which Doc's pills played an important part....

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Doc Porter's Medicine Show Company consisted of Doc himself, myself, a negro banjo player and roustabout named "George Watson", and an "educated" Indian who claimed to be a full-blooded Osage and whom Doc had picked up somewhere.

The Indian went by the name of "Chief Joe-Bull", and his part of the show was to pose on the stage or platform while the show was going on, as a sample of what a healthy Indian ought to look like. And in his head-dress, blanket, beaded pants and so on, he was a handsome looking savage.

Doc would talk to him in what was supposed to be Indian, while Doc was lecturing, then translate to the audience.

Chief Joe-Bull—offstage—could talk a darned sight better than most white men; I think he had been a Carlisle Carlisle foot-ball player! But he didn't do much talking, and I never saw more than [?] [barley?] a grin, which would indicate that he didn't have much of a sense of humor.

But I guess he did enjoy a joke as well as anybody....

Anyhow, Chief Joe-Bull played a trick on George, the negro, that must have caused him to chuckle inside of himself even if he 3 didn't crack a smile on the outside.

George required a lot of sleep to be contented and happy, and every chance he got he'd take a nap or two. Usually every afternoon he would sprawl out on the ground in the shade of the wagon, —or if there was a tree handy, under it—and sleep until something happened to wake him up.

He slept on his back and with his mouth opening and shutting as he breathed, like one of those big Mississippi River catfish opens and shuts his mouth when he's been pulled out of the water.

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When George slept he was dead to the world; flies, ants, grasshoppers, bugs and all their relations didn't bother him, and I used to sit and watch him—just to see how close he'd come to catching a fly or a bug in his mouth without doing it!

One afternoon, I was watching George sleep when Chief Joe-Bull came along and stood for a moment looking down at the happily unconscious negro; then without cracking a smile, Joe-Bull squatted down by George, took out a box of Liver Pills Doc Porter had given him and began dropping them, one by one, into George's mouth every time it would open.

Whenever a pill hit the back of his tongue, George would smack his mouth shut, gulp, swallow, and down it would go. In a minute his mouth would open again—and Chief Joe-Bull would feed him another pill!

It was George's mouth and Joe-Bull's pills—and so I didn't interfere.... Anyhow, I just wanted to see how far Joe-Bull would go. He went far enough. I counted nine pills he dropped into George's mouth, and nine times he swallowed one. When you consider that Doc Porter's pills were powerful, and one was a big dose for an ordinary man—while two would almost tear the insides out of a bear,—well, George had pills enough to last him quite a while!

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After he fed George the pills Joe-Bull came over, sat down by me and didn't say a word. Just sat there, wondering, I suppose, what would happen....

Well, it happened. In a couple of hours George waked up with “pains in his stomach”. And for the next several days he had the most “Gawd-a'mighty awful attack of crampin' cholera morbus” (as he called it) “Anybody ever did have!”

The funny part of it—or you might say tragic—was that when George told Doc Porter he was having “agonizin' misery in his stomach, an' crampin' terrible”, Doc said he needed a

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good claning cleaning out—and made him take three more Liver Pills! If that wasn't adding “insult to injury” it was certainly carrying “Coals to Newcastle”, or something of the sort!....

But George finally got to be normal again, although he lost most of the “shine” on his face and got awful weak before he did, and I don't reckon he ever knew that Chief Joe-Bull had pulled an Indian joke on him!

### \*\*\*\*\* THE DANCING TURKEYS

When a man's in the carnival business, it's a good deal like when he's playing the races; he's either in the mazuma big, or he's on his heels and Washing his own shirts. There doesn't seem to be any half-and-half spot he can land in. He's either broke or flush; he either makes it fast or don't make it at all.

But that don't mean that a real carnival man is ever on the town. He keeps a front and eats—not because it is handed to him from a back door or in a bread-line, but because he figures out some way to make it on his own.

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You don't see any genuine old-time carnival bird working the street for a dime, or picking up crumbs from a kitchen back dood door . They're independent, and even if they're down to the last two-bits you'd never know it by looking at them, or hear it from their own lips. They might do a lot of cussing in private, to themselves, but never a hard-luck story to the outsiders....

They've always got some kind of an idea tucked back in their head that they can pull out and turn into ham-and-egg money somehow.

Even if the show goes flat, they'll raise tickets to the next burg someway, and that without passing the public collection plate.

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And they'll raise it on the square—according to the “ethics” of the profession which is: “Give the 'suckers' nothing...for their money, but when you-give-them nothing...you give them something!” Just like Barnum with his [?] ” horse with its tail where its head ought to be” (with its head at the back of the stall and its tail in the manger) [?] gave the suckers nothing and still he gave them a dime's worth of “experience”, for looking at the bronco in reverse!

That's the way a carnival man is; he don't give them any thing, yet he gives them “something”—entertainment, experience, or amusement for the chicken feed he takes away from them at his rack, or wheel or ring-board. And if he has a run of “mud-luck” he always finds a way to get out somehow, raise a stake and climb back into the game.

That's the way it was when I invented the “Dancing turkeys” when I got into the carnival racket after quitting Doc Porter's Medicine Show.

It was down in the Ozark Hill country of Arkansas at a county fair, and it was one of those “dry hauls”. None of us were dragging in enough to even pay ground rent.

I was running a rack but none of the yokels in that neighborhood 6 seemed to have ambitions to be big league baseball pitchers and they'd just stand around and look at my babies, grin and never spend a dime for a handful of balls. Even when I'd spiel “free throws” they'd back off, look suspicious and hang onto their dimes....

It got under my skin and I figured there must be something they'd go for if I could only frame it up.

Well, I finally got my inspiration.

The town was one of those backwoods places like there used to be along in the late 1890's, where there wasn't any “stock laws” and [?] cows, horses, chickens and turkeys...and hound dogs...ran around without restraint.



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The turkeys wandering around the street, gawky and dumb looking, gave me my big idea....I'd invent "dancing turkeys!" The natives ought to go for that sort of a show....They did.

I got a big dry goods box, about four feet square, fixed it up with a wire cage on top; the back of the box open; bought a couple turkeys—a Tom and a hen; put 'em in the cage and was ready to exhibit my "dancing turkeys".

Those natives fell for it in droves—at a dime a piece. And it was a good show!

I'd spiel a crowd in—had 'em roped off so they couldn't get too close to the cage, then start the performance. The turks would be standing or [?] squatted there as sleepy and stupid as "common" turkeys are, then I'd start playing on a tin flute, something like an Indian snake charmer, sort of slow and soft at first. The turks would perk up, as if listening to the music, then they'd start to step around, jerking up first one foot then the other just as if they were keeping time to the tune. I'd watch 'em and as they stopped faster I'd play faster, and pretty soon those darned birds would be doing a regular tap dance or...maybe 'you ought to call it a "turkey trot"...

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around that cage! Then I'd ease down on the music, shoo the crowd out, and fill the tent with a new bunch of suckers....

Pretty soo soon I had plenty of dough. And my dancing turkeys was a sensation!

How'd I train 'em so quick?

Simple: I just had a tin bottom in the cage and a big coal-oil lamp under it; a negro kid inside of the box to turn the lamp up when I'd start to play, and turn it down when I'd kick the side of the box after the turks had danced long enough....

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It was worth the money and the natives got all they paid for... You know a turkey can lift his feet awful quick when he's standing on something hot—and he looks so darned funny when he's doing it....